

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES.

The Natural History of Ireland.—Vols. I. and II. *Birds, comprising the Orders Raptores, Insessores, Rasores, and Grallatores.*

By WILLIAM THOMPSON, Esq.—London: Reeve, Benham and Reeve.

THE first and second volumes of a work bearing the above title now lie upon our table; and the portion devoted exclusively to the Birds of Ireland will be completed in the third, which we believe is now in an advanced stage of preparation. Two volumes out of the three on this subject having now appeared, we feel we are in a position to state to our readers the plan and general arrangement of the work, and to express our opinion of its value as a contribution to our scientific literature.

In the pages of this journal, under its former title, there was commenced in the year 1838 a series of papers by Mr. Thompson on the Birds of Ireland, which was continued at intervals until 1843. It related to the birds comprised in the orders *Raptores*, *Insessores* and *Rasores*. All that was valuable in those papers has been transferred to the first volume of the present work and to the early part of the second volume, but with copious and valuable additions. Neither the *Grallatores* nor the *Natatores* have hitherto been systematically treated of by the author.

It is obvious that the two volumes now before us present in many respects a striking contrast. One treats of the birds of prey, and also of those “feathered choristers” which give melody to every brake, or whose graceful and easy flight realise to our eye the very poetry of motion. It comprises the birds of two orders (*Raptores* and *Insessores*). The other also treats of two orders (*Rasores* and *Grallatores*), and brings before us the heathy slope on which the grouse is sought by the sportsman, the bog with its “wisps” of snipe, and the calm sea-bay where flocks of dunlins, comprising many hundred individuals, dazzle the eye one moment by their brightness, and, in their changeful flight, become invisible the next. Such and so varied are the contents of these two volumes. We shall now state the purpose for which they appear to have been written, and a few of the leading points of interest which they embrace.

The author states his opinion—in which we entirely concur—that “every country should possess a natural history specially appertaining to itself.” For such a work he has been for a quarter of a century assiduously collecting the materials, on nearly every branch of which, as he himself informs us, he has matter almost ready for the press. The present volumes he expressly states are “put forward merely as supplementary to the several excellent works already published on British Ornithology.” For this reason, descriptions of form or plumage are in most instances omitted; when introduced they refer to some rare visitant, where critical examination and measurement seem, from the circumstances of each case, to be demanded.

In Mr. Thompson’s “Additions to the Fauna of Ireland,” and in all his former papers, our readers may recollect the precision with

which dates and localities were given, and the scrupulous exactness with which he acknowledged to all his correspondents his obligation for the facts they had communicated. The same trait of character is apparent throughout the present volumes. In fact, he modestly remarks in the preface, "that the work should rather be considered that of Irish ornithologists generally than of the individual whose name appears on the title-page."

To one who takes up a volume merely for the purpose of amusement, and who, in the words of Sterne, is "pleased with a book he knows not why and cares not wherefore," the detailed enumeration of dates, names and localities will no doubt be irksome, although even to such a reader, the work, replete as it is with varied anecdote, cannot fail to be attractive. But to those who read with a higher aim and for a loftier purpose, such details will assume a different aspect; and those whose range of ornithological reading is the most extended will most prize this positive information, and will draw from it oft-times an inference, perhaps a generalization, which but for such well-attested facts, they would not feel warranted in doing.

There is another light in which these details, though detracting to some extent from the popular character of the work, are even more valuable. They vouch for the fidelity of this record of the Birds of Ireland, as at present known by one who has spent a large portion of his life in their investigation. Fifty years hence, if any writer should take up the same subject, the present work will afford him a firm basis from which to start. Taking its record as true at this time, he will compare it with what he then finds around him, and note the changes that have taken place. Such changes are continually in progress, as evidenced in the present volumes. In the preface to the first, we have a very striking example of the extent to which birds are influenced by the labours of man:—

"It is interesting to observe how birds are affected by the operations of man. I have remarked this particularly at one locality near Belfast, situated 500 feet above the sea, and backed by hills rising to 800 feet. Marshy ground, the abode of little else than the snipe, became drained, and that species was consequently expelled. As cultivation advanced, the numerous species of small birds attendant on it became visitors, and plantations soon made them inhabitants of the place. The land-rail soon haunted the meadows; the quail and the partridge the fields of grain. A pond, covering less than an acre of ground, tempted annually for the first few years a pair of the graceful and handsome sandpipers (*Totanus hypoleucos*), which, with their brood, appeared at the end of July or beginning of August, on their way to the sea-side from their breeding haunt. This was in a moor about a mile distant, where a pair annually bred until driven away by drainage rendering it unsuitable. The pond was supplied by streams descending from the mountains through wild and rocky glens, the favourite haunt of the water-ouzel, which visited its margin daily throughout the year. When the willows planted at the water's edge

had attained a goodly size, the splendid kingfisher occasionally visited it during autumn. Rarely do the water-ouzel and kingfisher meet 'to drink at the same pool,' but here they did so. So soon as there was sufficient cover for the water-hen (*Gallinula chloropus*), it, an unbidden but most welcome guest, appeared and took up its permanent abode; a number of them frequently joining the poultry in the farm-yard at their repast. The heron, as if conscious that his deeds rendered him unwelcome, stealthily raised his 'blue bulk' aloft, and fled at our approach. The innocent and attractive wagtails, both pied and gray, were of course always to be seen about the pond. A couple of wild-ducks, and two or three teal, occasionally at different seasons, became visitants; and once, early in October, a tufted duck (*Fuligula cristata*) arrived, and after remaining a few days took its departure, but returned in company with two or three others of the same species. These went off several times, but returned on each occasion with an increase to their numbers, until above a dozen adorned the water with their presence. During severe frost, the woodcock was driven to the unfrozen rill dripping into it beneath a dense mass of foliage; and the snipe, together with the jack-snipe, appeared along the edge of the water. The titlark, too, visited it at such times. In summer, the swallow, house-martin, sand-martin and swift displayed their respective modes of flight in pursuit of prey above the surface of the pond. The sedge-warbler poured forth its imitative or mocking notes from the cover on the banks, as did the willow-wren its simple song. This bird was almost constantly to be seen ascending the branches and twigs of the willows (*Salix viminalis* chiefly) that overhung the water, for *Aphides* and other insect prey. In winter, lesser redpoles in little flocks were swayed gracefully about, while extracting food from the light and pendent bunches of the alder-seed. Three species of tit (*Parus major*, *cæruleus* and *ater*), and the gold-crested regulus, appeared in lively and varied attitudes on the larch and other trees. In winter, also, and especially during frost, the wren and the hedge-accentor were sure to be seen threading their modest way among the entangled roots of the trees and brushwood, little elevated above the surface of the water.

"So far only, the pond and bordering foliage have been considered: many other species might be named as seen upon the trees. On the banks a few yards distant, fine Portugal laurels tempted the greenfinch to take up its permanent residence, and served as a roost during the winter for many hundred linnets, which made known the place of their choice by congregating in some fine tall poplars that towered above the shrubs, and thence poured forth their evening jubilee."

The bittern, which has been observed in several localities in each of the four provinces of Ireland, is now becoming scarce, owing to the drainage of the bogs and marshes. A time may come when

"Deep-waving fields and pastures green"

will occupy the swampy solitudes in which it now dwells, and the

species, after gradually becoming more and more rare, may hereafter become altogether extinct. The records now given of its occurrence will then acquire an importance beyond that with which they are at present invested. The same observation applies to many other birds yet indigenous to Ireland. Already several species, which were at one time abundant, have become extinct, or are only known as rare visitants, and the author has not failed to supply, from all authentic sources, such particulars respecting them as are most worthy of preservation.

The situation of Ireland gives interest to a comparative list of its birds with those of Great Britain; and accordingly Mr. Thompson has appended to each order a valuable summary, showing at a glance the species peculiar to the respective islands. The differences between them are not to be accounted for by local causes, such as mineralogical structure or climate, but must be attributed to the laws of *geographical* distribution. In this respect, all that pertains to Ireland and distinguishes it from other European countries becomes of philosophical interest, considered in connexion with its insular position, and its being the most western of all European lands.

In reading Mr. Thompson's pages, we do not receive information merely with reference to the birds of Ireland as compared with those of Great Britain, but not unfrequently we have tidings of their migrations, habits and comparative abundance, both in the Arctic circle and in the sunny isles of the Ægean. In this way it occasionally happens, that the author leads us with him almost insensibly to brighter skies and classic scenes, so fraught with pictorial and poetic interest, that we are tempted to forget the measured language of the reviewer of a scientific work, and express without reservation the delight which the reading of certain passages has afforded. As an example, we would refer to the bee-eater, vol. i. p. 367:—

“I have had the gratification of seeing the bee-eater in scenes with which its brilliant plumage was more in harmony than with any in the British Isles. It first excited my admiration in August 1826, when visiting the celebrated grotto of Egeria, near Rome. On approaching this classic spot, several of these birds, in rapid, swift-like flight, swept closely past and around us, uttering their peculiar call, and with their graceful form and brilliant colours proved irresistibly attractive. My companion, who, as well as myself, beheld them for the first time, was so greatly struck with the beauty of their plumage and bold sweeping flight, as to term them the presiding deities over Egeria's Grotto. Rich as was the spot in historical and poetical associations, it was not less so in pictorial charms; all was in admirable keeping:—the picturesque grotto with its ivy-mantled entrance and gushing spring; the gracefully reclining, though headless white marble statue of the nymph; the sides of the grotto covered with the exquisitely beautiful maiden-hair fern in the richest luxuriance; the wilderness of wild flowers around the exterior, attracting the bees, on which the *Merops* was feeding; and over all, the deep blue sky of Rome completing the picture.”

Or another instance may be selected relating to the rock-dove, vol. ii. p. 13:—

“The mention of various places in connexion with this bird induces me to remark, though at the expense of the repetition of a few names, that nearly as the ring-dove and the rock-dove, distributed in suitable localities over the British Islands, are allied, their haunts are very different; the former being associated with the tender and the beautiful, the latter with the stern and the sublime in nature. The ring-dove is most at home in the lordly domain, rich in noble and majestic trees, the accumulated growth of centuries. The stately beech, beautiful even in winter, when with grayish-silver stem it towers upwards from its favourite sloping banks,—richly carpeted in the russet hue of its fallen leaves,—and expands into a graceful head of reddish branches, affords the species nightly shelter. The same tree, too, may have cradled the infant ring-dove; and when the bird became mature, fed it with its ‘mast.’ The rock-dove, on the other hand, has its abode in the gloomy caverns both of land and sea. How various are the scenes—nay, countries and climates—brought vividly, with all their accompaniments, before the mind, by the sight of this handsome species! A brief indication of the nature of a very few may here be given; and in the first place, of two similar in kind, but ‘yet how different!’ The most northern great water-fall at which this bird has come under my notice is that of Foyers, in Inverness-shire, where its habitation,

‘Dim-seen through rising mists and ceaseless showers,
The hoary cavern, wide-surrounding, lowers.’

“Over this fall ‘the evergreen pine’ presides in majesty, and the surrounding scenery partakes of the fine bold character of the ‘land of the mountain and the flood.’ From the banks above, we may, however, in a serene day, gaze across the lengthened expanse of Loch Ness as it sleeps in azure, and over the steep mountain-sides that rise from its margin richly wooded with the graceful weeping birch (the predominant species), the hazel, and other indigenous trees, until the eye rests on the somewhat distant and lofty pyramidal summit of Maelfourvonie. The most southern locality of a similar kind, in which rock-doves attracted my attention, was amid the enchanting scenery of the Sabine hills, about the celebrated cascade of the Anio at Tivoli, where, numerous as domestic pigeons in a well-stocked dove-cot, they appeared flying in and out of the gloomy recesses of the rocks close to where the mass of waters was precipitated. The cliffs above these falls are crowned by the ruins of the Corinthian temple of Vesta; from the neighbouring hill-sides the great aloe and the myrtle spring spontaneously, while the most antique of olive-trees, many of them even grotesque from the decrepitude of age, form the chief features of the foliage. Afar, over the dreary Campagna, Rome, once mistress of the world, appears.

“In the snow-white caves adjacent to Dunluce Castle, near the Giant’s Causeway, and those darkly pierced in the long range of stupendous cliffs at the Horn in Donegal, which boldly confront the At-

lantic, southward to those of Sphacteria whose precipices are laved by the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, I have remarked that the rock-dove equally finds a home; as it likewise does in islets from the high and rugged promontory of Oe, in Islay, off the south-western coast of Scotland, to the 'Isles of Greece.'"

If from considering the range of species, and the circumstances which invest them with adventitious interest, we confine our attention to individual species as observed in Ireland, we find abundance of material, carefully collected and judiciously brought together. Under this head we might refer to the full and accurate manner in which the food of each is noted, after the author's personal examination of the contents of the stomachs of different individuals. His critical knowledge of species, both of plants and of those invertebrate animals that afford the means of subsistence to numerous families of birds, becomes here of great importance, and has enabled him to treat this part of his subject with a completeness which is rare, if not unequalled.

The number of quails which appear to winter in Ireland, forms a singular point of contrast between Great Britain and the sister island. The woodcock, on which notes of the highest interest are given, suggests a similar comparison. But perhaps there is no species which offers more numerous topics than the heron (*Ardea cinerea*). We are accustomed in Britain to regard it as solitary in its habits during the winter; in the Bay of Belfast it becomes gregarious, and flocks of from thirty to sixty are mentioned. Their appearance, whether perched on trees, congregated in meadows and ploughed fields, or mustered on the beach, is described—sometimes as seen in bright sunshine, and at others as they pursue their piscatory vocation by the light of the moon.

The book abounds with anecdotes illustrative of habits, and told in a most attractive style. We might refer as examples of this to the land-rail (vol. ii. p. 317), or to the heron in confinement (vol. ii. p. 152). Perhaps however a still more attractive little "bit" of biography may be found in the history of a pet magpie, vol. i. p. 334, or that of three redbreasts, vol. i. p. 167.

One who studies, as Mr. Thompson has done, the habits of birds amid their native haunts, where alone the true enjoyment of ornithological pursuits can be felt, is brought at times into the midst of scenery, which the mind that is alive to what is beautiful in nature, cannot contemplate unmoved. It is but natural therefore that the author should occasionally turn from the birds to the scenery in which they are found. Of this we have examples in vol. ii. pp. 55, 246.

On the whole, we have no hesitation in saying that this book must take its place by the side of those which are justly regarded as standard works on Ornithology. Its facts will commend it to the man of science, and the manner in which they are conveyed will win for it a ready admission to many a domestic circle. We hail it as a valuable addition to our literature, and shall look forward with impatience for the remaining volumes.